


SPORT OPINION

# Why rugby has never been the self-proclaimed civilised sport it believes itself to be

Columnist Aled Blake on a week which has proved a reality check for Wales' national game

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 **BY ALED BLAKE**  
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Wales rugby fans

It was always a shaky truth: that the game of rugby, that the culture of rugby, was founded on something called Respect.

For those who love the oval ball game, who live in the misguided notion that their sport is founded on healthy, manly, mutual respect, the events of

this week must have come as a depressing shock...

Their game is actually just like “soccer”.

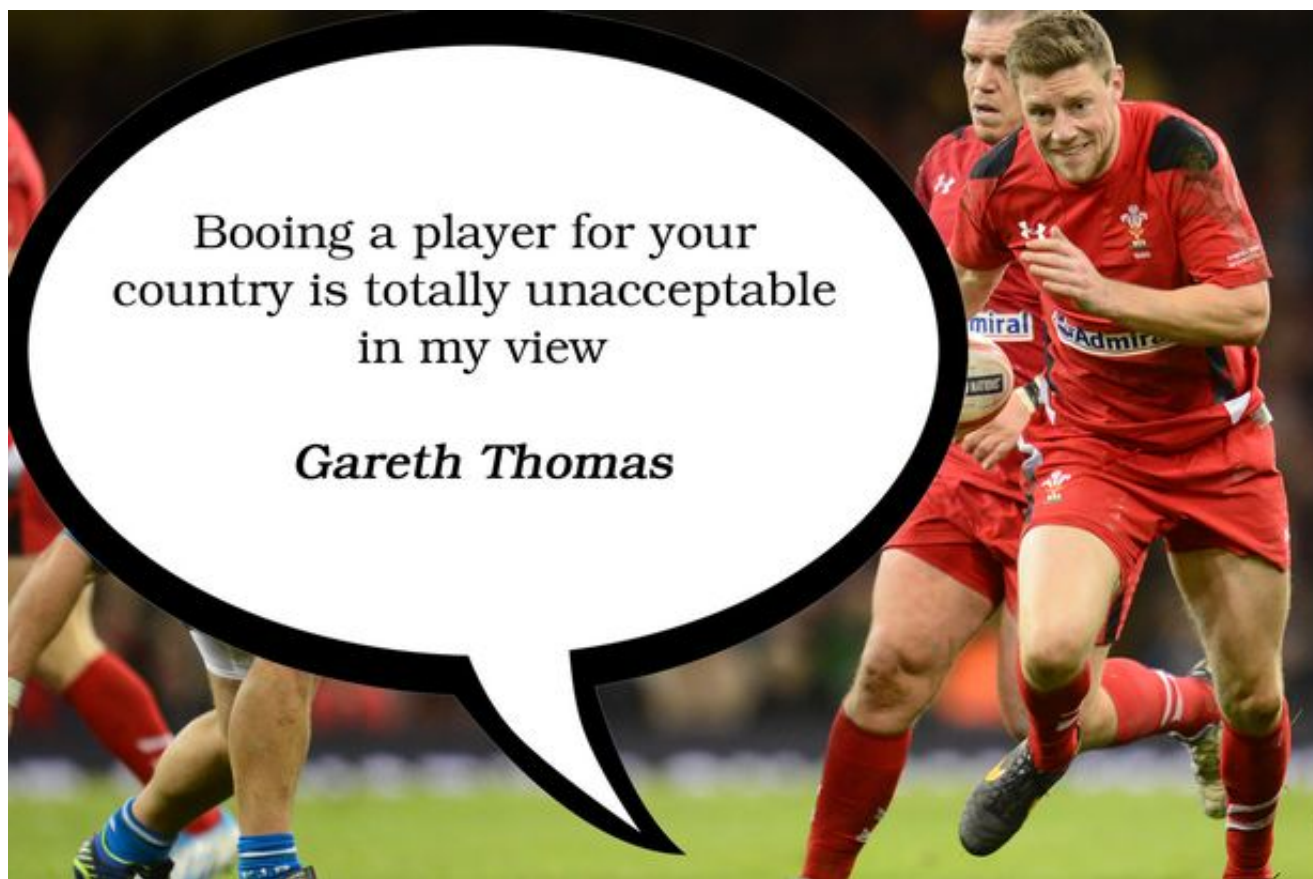
Amid the fog of wintergreened legs, the beery club houses, the picture-perfect Valleys village grounds, there has been a blinkered, misguided perception of rugby union – not just as a sport, but as a living, breathing cultural entity – and the supposed values that are fundamental to its existence.

Because those who love their game believe it to be both egalitarian and civilised, the brutality of rugby on the pitch a stark contrast to the gentlemanly behaviour off it.

But here’s the realisation this week: the beautiful game of rugby football is not so beautiful after all.

First came the outrage at, of all things, **[boos at the Millennium Stadium for one of our own](#)** – the substitute Rhys Priestland was apparently jeered when he came in to the pitch for Wales against Australia.

[What the Wales fans said about the booing of Rhys Priestland](#)



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Then came altogether more unsavoury (alleged) behaviour at Twickenham, where the referee Nigel Owens was said to have been the victim of homophobic and racist abuse by certain members of the crowd during the England match against New Zealand.

Owens, who has done so much in helping to tackle that last taboo in sport – homosexuality – was naturally appalled by the allegations.

“I think there’s no doubt there are certain sections of rugby crowds which are changing,” he said afterwards, hinting that rugby’s glorious era of piety is at its end.

And then came a point with which I would definitely disagree: “You can sense the change in attitude and maybe there is an argument to say it is becoming more like football. It is still a minority but it is there.”



**Referee Nigel Owens**

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It's time, here, to place on record (though I have done it many times before) the utter contempt I already hold for the game of rugby and all that it supposedly stands for. Because I am a bona-fide, unreconstructed, rugby-hating football fan in Wales.

There are an array of reasons behind my antipathy for our supposed national game, the self-serving ethical worthiness of the entire sport and the small coterie of back-slapping white men who run it, is one of the top ones.

It is the cliched contrast between rugby and football that is used to illustrate why rugby is a better sport and one we should all be proud to hold as Wales' number one sport – a sport which supposedly embodies everything we stand for in our great nation – that annoys me so much.

The real truth needs to be told at times of crises like this... when football has to be used as the knuckle-dragging antithesis of the great game of rugby by the union establishment.

Of course there is an anti-social element in football fandom – but there is just as strong a streak of the anti-social in rugby. It is merely that we choose not to hear about it.



Cardiff City fans

At my football club (Cardiff City) the other day, the pre-match minute's silence for Remembrance was ruined by a small minority of Leeds United fans who chanted. They were roundly booed by Cardiff fans afterwards for their shameful behaviour.

And that is a contrast to the respected silences at rugby matches last weekend – but probably more importantly in the rugby-football narrative, it was in contrast to the respected silences at virtually every other football ground in the United Kingdom over the Remembrance period. Add up those attendances and that's thousands more people respecting our war dead than at the international rugby matches.

Such unsavoury events at the Cardiff City Stadium are thankfully rare ones.

Football today is as safe as it has ever been, though the passions of its followers remain as fervent. More so than rugby can ever hope for.

There is nothing on earth like a great game of football, with two sets of supporters passionately cheering on their teams to victory. There is nothing quite like the feeling of victory, or defeat, that comes with those games.

Just like any great popular pastime football carries with it the demons of alcohol and disorder and disrespect.

And it is in this where football and rugby share a fundamental reality – it's only the nature of their portrayal where they differ.

Rugby-associated violence is harmless hi-jinx or small-scale disorder; football-associated violence is dangerous hooliganism. In reality, the consequences and nature of both are virtually the same.

I suspect that as long as football and rugby remain popular sports, they will have a minority out to disrupt the peace of others – like it or not they BOTH always have.

Perhaps if rugby wakes up to that reality – as football did a long time ago – its authorities can begin to deal with its problem fans.